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# L2: Learner Autobiographies, vol. 2

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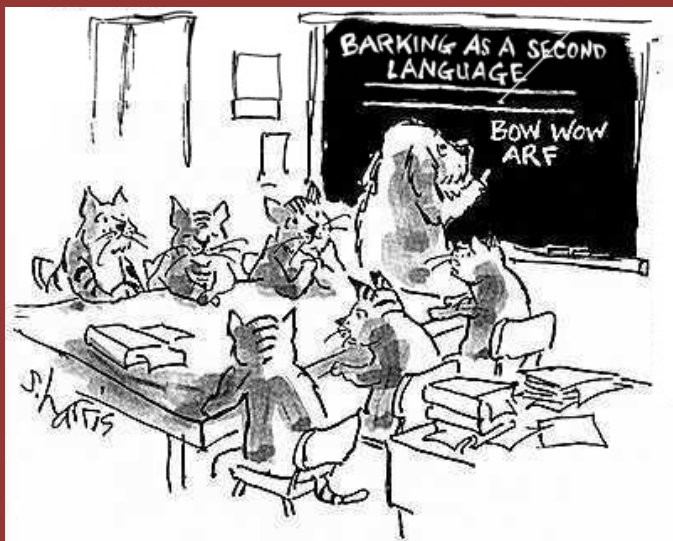
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# *L2 Learner Autobiographies*



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**Vol. 2**

**Edited by  
PETKO IVANOV**

*Connizdat 2015*

# L2 Learner Autobiographies

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## Introductory Remarks

The papers collected in this volume contribute to the growing literature of the hitherto marginalized genre of the L2 (second language) learner autobiography. They were originally written for an assignment by participants in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) course at Connecticut College in the fall semester of 2015. The contributors responded to a prompt asking them to analyze their experience *with* and their beliefs *about* second language learning, the practices of and perceptions about foreign language teaching in their primary culture, and their personal idiosyncrasies as L2 learners. The essays reflect the biographical specifics surrounding the acquisition of another language by learners who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, most of them share privileged access to language learning resources, ones that usually include structured, classroom-based instruction. These statements also reflect the contributors' critical awareness of the role of L2 learning ideologies in the practices of mastering languages other than the ones they were first socialized in. *Connizdat* (a nod to Connecticut College and *samizdat*, the Russian for "self-publishing") makes them available in the hopes that they will productively contribute to our campus-wide dialogue on second language acquisition as an indispensable part of the intercultural competence that is needed to meet the challenges of global citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *SPANISH, FRENCH....RUSSIAN?*

Kaitlin Cunningham

Despite growing up in California, at the earliest opportunity to choose my second language course in school, I chose French instead of Spanish. This would seem counterintuitive, considering the large Mexican American and Spanish speaking populations in California. Most of my young peers did not understand why I would make the switch to a new language after a year of compulsory 4<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish. All I knew was that I hated Spanish language, and was in love with a country I actually did not know much about. That country was France. When I was young I had already decided France, specifically Paris, was my favorite place in the whole world. An interesting notion for a middle schooler to have, considering that little girl had never actually visited France. The only knowledge I had about French and the French language were from what I had learned in after school French lessons with a friend of my mother's, who had worked as a bike tour guide through the vineyards of France's Burgundy region. Reflecting back on this time, I realize it may have been my exposure to two very different learning and teaching styles, which correlated with either French or Spanish. This may have played a subconscious, but nonetheless important role in my young decision-making, which led me to choose the unpopular choice.

My French lessons with Bettie, a friend of my parents, a regular at my parents' restaurant, and the sweetest woman

alive, gave weekly French lessons to my best friend and I after school. It is difficult for me to recall whether or not I was also taking Spanish in school at the time, revealing my lack of investment in the subject. I can't recall my Spanish instructors name, or what she looked like. I recall only one lesson when we learned how to say all the colors in Spanish. I remember only one: orange. I would not doubt that I blocked my experiences in the Spanish language classroom out because of how passionately I disliked it. On the other hand, French lessons with Bettie were fun, relaxed, and interactive. I got to spend extra time with my best friend learning some French words and eating French foods or learning about French culture. Bettie made me feel like France was the most wonderful place in the world. It was not a question for me whether or not I would choose French over Spanish, it seemed like the obvious option. I never seemed to consider that learning Spanish might have made more "sense," considering Spanish is the second widest spoken language in the United States. My parents never questioned my decision, and I preferred being in the significantly smaller language class. It was almost like a special, alternative club.

From 5<sup>th</sup> grade on I was hooked. I picked up French quickly, mastered the accent, and fell in love with the culture, especially the food! Later in middle school I even had the chance to visit my beloved Paris with my father on his business trip to the Paris Air Show. Being able to use my French in this city I loved so much gave me incentive to keep learning more and more, with my goal of attaining fluency. Naturally I enrolled in French for my freshman year of high school. I was placed into a higher level than most freshmen and I excelled.



Around Christmas time my parents informed me that our family would be moving to Paris for two years for my father's job. As a student of French and a Francophile through and through, this could not have been more exciting news. I was hesitant to leave all the friends and extracurriculars I loved to a country on the other side of the world. Although I had moved a few times in my life, I had never lived outside of the continental United States. I decided that living in France would be an incredible opportunity, especially to strengthen my French and put my second language skills to practical use, and that I could return to my boarding school when my family moved back to the United States.

Living in Paris for two years was without a doubt one of the most incredible experiences of my entire life. I was so lucky to be able to immerse myself in French culture, language, history, and food! Many of my friends and peers at the American School of Paris had not studied French at their schools stateside, and in many ways I had a leg up on incoming students that year. Using my French language skills every day in practical and classroom environments brought me to a level of French speaking and comprehension that I would consider fluent or nearly fluent. Being able to listen to, learn from, and imitate native French speakers had considerable positive impact on my language ability. When I returned to the States I had a strong command of the language, and sometimes felt bored in my French class because my language caliber was a bit higher than my peers. I began to check out of my French classes, relying on the skills I had already gained growing up and during my time abroad. Higher-level French "content" courses tended to focus only on French history (specifically

colonialism) and I stopped caring. I wished that higher-level French courses could have any other focus, but somehow everything circled back to French colonialism. I am sad to say that by the time I graduated high school, I never really wanted to take a French class again. I never stopped loving France, the language, and the culture, but my graduation from high school marked the end of a significant chapter in my language biography.

To correctly explain my shift from French to Russian language, I must rewind to my sophomore year of high school, when I was studying at the American School of Paris. In my required history course, “World History,” we spent a significant amount of time discussing Marxism and the Bolshevik revolution. I was completely enthralled with this political ideology so starkly different from the one I was socialized into my entire life. This is what sparked my interest in Russia, and eventually Russian language, although this interest would not come to fruition until my freshmen year at Connecticut College. I was intent on enrolling in Elementary Russian, and devoting my studies to the region, it’s history, politics, literature, and culture. Incredible hands on teaching nurtured my spark into a full fire. I took as many classes on the topic as I could, including a Russian language course every year. I would consider the first peak of my Russian language learning to be my semester abroad in Moscow. Although I had done considerable Russian coursework, including an 8 week summer intensive, there was no match for in-country language experience. Much like my time in France, my Russian language abilities blossomed. It was so much fun learning from Russians how they actually speak in everyday life, not just what their

language looks like in a textbook. I definitely feel that my semester in Moscow brought me from the intermediate to the advanced level. Not only did I learn a ton on the street and from my host mom, I had some incredible teachers. My semester in Moscow gave me the confidence I needed to continue my long journey to Russian fluency.

I truly love learning languages. Although Russian is my linguistic priority at the moment and for the foreseeable future, I feel I am a lifelong language learner. I am too interested in other cultures not to learn languages. I feel it is imperative to being a global citizen. My cultural interests have always influenced my language acquisition, and I do not see an end to this trend. My goal is to continue learning languages and their cultures throughout my life, in order to foster cross cultural understanding and communication with the American government.

## *JUMPING INTO LANGUAGE*

Caitlin Flohr

“Caitlin, someone in our family needs to know how to speak Chinese,” my brother, Spencer, who had recently dropped his Mandarin class said to me. He thought it was too difficult to start a language in college whereas I was still in high school and had the capability to learn a new language. As a rising sophomore, I had the option of adding an extra class to my schedule for the coming year. I was already taking Latin at the time, and supposed throwing Chinese into the mix would be fun and completely different from what I was accustomed to. Besides having me begin Chinese, Spencer had everything figured out. After finishing Chinese I at my high school, I would spend five weeks of my summer in Beijing doing an intensive language program, return to high school having skipped a level of Chinese, and finally go back to Beijing for my senior year of high school. Spencer was my shepherd; I was his sheep. I followed him on this language journey and he never lead me to tainted water. Through this, I learned the key to studying a second language; and how you know you have acquired the language if the language has acquired you. But before we get ahead of ourselves, we must start from the beginning.

I was born in a small town in Pennsylvania with English as the primary language in our area. Growing up my parents were not partial to child-directed speech. In fact, my mother believed we should be spoken to like adults, not sparing us from too many ‘big words’. My family members were most

definitely my primary teachers of English. Coming from a rural area, there were not too many opportunities for me to constantly be communicating with other people; I was either playing with my brother or entertaining myself. Perhaps that has a connection with my first words, or attempt at words, 'brub bruh' meaning brother. Other than English, I was exposed to a small amount of German. Both of my parents come from Pennsylvania Dutch families, and took German in high school. Although they were not fluently speaking German to me, in certain situations they would bring out phrases—specifically when I would be in trouble. Warning me not to do something... eins...zwei...drei. Other than English and the sparing amount of German I was not introduced to a new language until high school.

Ninth grade marked the beginning of many new things: new school, new me, new language. Stepping into my first Latin class I was certainly nervous; my teacher was a family friend so I felt I had a standard to uphold. Yet little did I know, this class was going to be my favorite class of the year. This was mainly true because my teacher was hysterical. He could make learning the most mundane tasks the most exciting. For our very first declension quiz he taught us a song to help us learn the order in which the endings go. From there I was a declension song addict. In addition to the songs, I would make color coded charts to go along with them. If I could put it in a chart, I would. For me, this was the best way to memorize anything in Latin because I could visualize what was going on. But perhaps what pushed me even further was the competition. More so than any other class, I felt compelled to always be at the top. If I came second or third on a test, it only

pushed me more to do better the next time. However, the latter habit was broken when I transitioned to learning Chinese.

One the first day of school sophomore year I walked into my Chinese class and half of the students were Asians. They were always doing better than me, and I had to accept that I was not going to be at the top of the class. Instead, if I could match their grades, I felt that I had succeeded. My teacher was new to the school and was still getting used to her new environment and trying to uphold the parameters the previous Chinese teacher had left. We used a very simple textbook and in class we would practice using the new vocabulary we had learned. During the first week, my teacher stressed to us how much of a time commitment Chinese was going to be. Every day, even if we didn't have class, we had to practice listening to pinyin and work on tones. This was not something that was going to come to us simply by doing the homework assigned and moving on. Just as in Latin, my teacher sent us musical videos to help us learn how to pronounce the pinyin in Chinese. The main difference I found between learning Chinese and Latin was there were fewer charts I could make. Chinese was more study-repeat, study-repeat, with very little color-coding opportunities. But it was not until I went to China that I learned how to study Chinese.

Day one of Chinese class in Beijing: no English allowed. The native Chinese teachers restricted us to only use the target language. If we needed to know how to say something we had to figure out another way to ask it in Chinese, otherwise they would deduct points from our participation grade. This was the rule for all three of our classes. The first, which had ten

students, focused on sentence structures and new vocabulary. The second class was meant for using everything new we had learned and applied it to our daily lives. Lastly, we had a two-person class where we could dictate what we wanted to do as long as we used Chinese. However, the director informed us that while we would be learning in the classroom we would learn more by talking with our host families and other Chinese people on the streets. Therefore, I would go home every day and try to talk with my host mother and grandmother. Unfortunately for me, my host sister had impeccable English. Since I had only studied Chinese for one year she was often my crutch in communicating with my family. Throughout my five weeks I began new study habits. For each new vocabulary term I would say it out loud at least ten times, write it until I could remember every part of the character, and quiz myself by switching up if I would start with the English, pinyin, or characters. But most importantly I had the opportunity to see how native speakers of Chinese study. My grandmother used to be a teacher before she retired to take care of my host sister. Each day she would come to our house to make dinner. As she cooked dinner, she watched me from the kitchen and periodically come into my room and made me read allowed the vocabulary and dialogue for that night. This would go on until I could do it to her satisfaction. As a result, I left China more confident in my speaking and willing to use it.

As anticipated, when I returned to school, I moved to the third level of Chinese. My excitement to get back into the classroom quickly turned into frustration. Even though my Chinese teacher was settling into her position by selecting harder textbooks, setting higher expectations and encouraging

us to use more Chinese, she still didn't allow us to have the speaking freedom that I had in Beijing. We were not allowed to make up our own stories and scenarios, but instead had to follow the textbook. It took me a little while, but I stuck with it knowing that I would soon be back in China.

August came and it was time for me to move to Beijing for my senior year of high school. Along with my regular classes, I still had the three types of Chinese classes like I had in the summer program. The hardest thing to adapt to was my host family not knowing any English. Often times my mother would try to sign things to me or think of ways to simplify her speech. Although this was extremely frustrating, it increased my oral abilities. The biggest difference from the summer to the school year was that I went out every weekend and later did independent travel. This forced me to constantly be talking with Chinese people, and pushed me to be clear and concise in what I was trying to convey. Sometime throughout those weekends I discovered how deep into the language I was. For example, there was a certain point where Chinese went from something fun to do on the side, to being a part of who I am. There would be times I would feel much more comfortable conveying my thoughts or feelings using Chinese instead of my native language. However, while in Beijing, there was one negative effect on my Chinese study. My writing skills started to diminish, and I began valuing speaking far more than writing. But this is not something I regret; because of this I was able to more easily connect with the people I was surrounded with.

Through my experiences I have developed my idea of what it means to seriously acquire a second language. I am a



firm believer in not everyone learns the same way, specifically with languages. Yet I think the following has a trend of aiding the most people to a high level of fluency in a second language. Going into a country where the second language you are studying is the primary language is by far the best way to learn. It pushes you to learn the most quickly. And in a sense, you have to or else you will not survive in that society. I understand that not everyone has the luxury to go abroad. If this is the case, it is the teacher's responsibility to create an environment that imitates that of the culture though only speaking the target language in the class (at least after briefly introducing the language). Secondly, there should be daily quizzes that test new material; hopefully the grades would serve as positive reinforcement. Another way to provide positive reinforcement would be through having non-scripted conversations. But this only works if the teacher and student have a good bond, because it allows the student to not feel nervous when talking with them and more open to correction. Confidence is key, and the way to build confidence is by speaking. For without socialization it is nearly impossible to obtain language.

*'UNA CHICA BLANCA' SPEAKING SPANISH*

Caroline Miller

Seventh grade delivered me a choice: while I had to take a language class, I could choose between Spanish and French. Without deliberation, I chose French. My decision had a two-part premise. First, I was—and still am—incapable of rolling my “r,” and at the time, I concluded that this meant I would never be able to speak Spanish competently. Second, starting in kindergarten I had been “learning” Spanish, and by seventh grade I still could not manage anything beyond *hola* and *como estas*. I say “learning” because my elementary school’s method of teaching Spanish was to sit the class down in front of a small television for thirty minutes, twice a week, and push in a Spanish language video. I realize now that our Spanish learning time was probably “teacher break time.” No matter what the purpose, though, the method of watch, listen, and repeat to learn a language was fruitless, and I considered it a waste of time.

In hindsight, Spanish was my first attempt to acquire a second language, although I was reluctant to learn it. Even in sixth grade, when we had an actual Spanish teacher to teach us Spanish, I could not grasp it. Or rather, I refused to grasp it. Six years of wasting time in front of a video screen had made me feel that learning Spanish was a waste of time. The Spanish teacher constantly correcting my accent—or lack thereof—made me feel like a language learning failure each class. The end result of my first attempt at learning Spanish was a deep-

seated fear of speaking Spanish. My major accomplishment was knowing just enough Spanish to say *no hablo español*.

In contrast, my sixth grade introductory French class was fun, a strange change. I actually walked out of each class knowing more and more about the new language. The teacher would speak to us in French, and expect us to do the same even with our extremely limited vocabulary. But if we did not understand, she would willingly break down the conversation into English, and then revert back to French. Looking back, I find my choice to take French in middle school, then throughout high school, unsurprising.

High school allowed me to continue my French studies. Because of my high school's block scheduling system, I took French every day for seventy minutes a day until I finished all the French classes offered there. Between my two French teachers, I was able to learn enough of the language to the extent that when my mother and I went to Paris, I was able to hold conversations with the native French speakers, much to their surprise. At the end of my junior year, I took the A.P. French test and passed it with flying colors.

Unfortunately, I lacked the maturity to realize that without practice, my French skills would fumble. As a senior, I occasionally tried to speak to my French teacher, but without the constant practice my French started to dwindle. I could still hold conversations, but unlike my junior year, when I could speak without thinking—that is, I did not have to first conjure the thought in English, then translate it, then speak—my senior year brought slow, stuttering conversation. I planned to continue taking French classes in college, but I ended up

attending a school that does not offer French classes, but only Spanish.

Seven years after my last attempt at learning Spanish, I walked into a classroom, sat down, and listened to the teacher tell us all about the class in a language I barely understood. Whatever I did understand was courtesy of the similarities among French, Spanish, and English. What made the first class even more challenging was that I was not in a beginner Spanish class; on the required multiple-choice placement test, I had placed into Spanish three, because my understanding of French grammar helped me guess the correct answers on the test. While I ended up taking Spanish 1/2—a combination of Spanish 1 and 2, designed for people who had some basic understanding of the language—instead of Spanish 3, I still felt like I was in over my head.

However, my second attempt at learning Spanish was very different than my first. Like my French teachers, my Spanish teacher emphasized speaking the language, even with limited vocabulary. She pushed responding, rather than repeating, in Spanish. By the end of the course, I could hold a basic conversation in Spanish, even though I could not roll my r's. Unlike my sixth grade teacher who constantly corrected me about my terrible accent, my Spanish teacher emphasized being able to simply speak the language. I did not have to sound like a native Spanish speaker; I just needed to be able to speak understandable Spanish.

That summer, I ended up being stationed in South Padre Island, Texas, where being able to speak Spanish was a useful tool. South Padre Island is six miles from the border of Mexico, and in many places Spanish was the primary language.

Being able to at least understand Spanish helped me maintain situational awareness. Towards the end of my time there, I started to feel comfortable walking into a restaurant and saying *buenas noches*. Sometimes, the host would be surprised that *una chica blanca* spoke Spanish, although my accent made it clear that I was not a native speaker.

When I returned to the Academy, I made the choice to overload my schedule so that I could continue to take Spanish classes. As I went through the upper levels of Spanish, I started to notice less of an emphasis on learning and more on just simply experiencing Spanish. While the teacher continued to teach us grammar and some vocabulary, students were mainly expected to just talk and discuss topics that came from Spanish readings and movies. Our grammar was not always perfect during the conversations, but as long as the conversation remained fluid, our professor was content going over our trouble areas towards the end of the class as the conversation died down.

I finished all of the Spanish classes offered at my college last spring, but I learned from my failure to retain French. I push myself to practice Spanish, either with other people or using computer programs such as Duolingo. If I feel lazy, I watch a movie or a television show in Spanish and try to focus on listening and understanding what the speaker is saying in Spanish, rather than translating the Spanish into English to comprehend it.

I still sound like *una chica blanca* when I speak Spanish. But I can successfully speak and understand it. Today, when someone asks me if I speak Spanish, I proudly say *sí, yo hablo español!*

*LANGUAGE LEARNING BECAME A HOBBY FOR ME*

Julia Panter

As a child, I was entranced by the idea of bilingualism. Growing up in a small, predominantly white town in central New Jersey, I had almost no exposure to languages other than my native English for the first near-decade of my life. Thusly, the concept of a person being able to fully express themselves in a language other than English fascinated me, and from a young age, I yearned to understand the concept of language and how it works. However, despite my innate interest in language (and taking several language classes in the years prior), it was only in junior high school that I truly came to consider myself a second language learner.

Perhaps my earliest exposure to a foreign language was at the synagogue, where I learned to read and sing prayers in Hebrew. However, my exposure to the language was limited to the few bits of religious jargon that I picked up from my teachers, along with the few basic expressions that my father had learned during his time in Israel. Despite having spent 9 years of my life in Hebrew School, however, I am still unable to produce a single sentence in the language.

My formal education in as a second language learner commenced in second grade, when Spanish was introduced as a mandatory class. However, I struggled to learn Spanish, which led me to dislike the subject—I found the grammar to be extremely difficult, and failed to understand certain

grammatical structures; in particular, I struggled to understand why a noun would proceed the adjective that described it.

In the seventh grade, I bid Spanish an “adios” and switched to French, and fell immediately in love with the language. Although I initially struggled with French as I had with Spanish, I quickly came to discover a genuine interest in the French language and culture. This, I found, has made all the difference in my ability to learn foreign languages. My love for French became my biggest asset in the classroom, and it fueled my ability to learn. Where my classmates felt discouraged by the silent endings and muted but guttural “r” sounds, I relished in the beauty of the language. Its linguistic nuances delighted me and I yearned to fully immerse myself in the culture of that beautiful language. Whereas in Spanish, I had had no desire to learn to speak the language, I craved French fluency and found myself continually working toward that goal. Despite its grammatical similarities with Spanish, I quickly picked up the conjugation rules and gender agreement, and even made my peace with nouns preceding the adjectives that described them. Most importantly, however, I truly fell in love with the language. Speaking and understanding French made me happy—to this day, my proficiency in French is one of my proudest accomplishments.

By the time I entered my freshman year of college, language learning had become somewhat of a hobby for me. I loved the sense of accomplishment that I got from correctly producing a sentence in another language. I chose Russian for several reasons: first, my great-grandfather had emigrated from a small Russian (now Polish) town, Klemontov [Klimontów], to New York, and I hoped to gain a cultural

perspective on the life that he had left behind in Eastern Europe. Secondly, I had once read a book about the hemophiliac son of the last Tsar, Alexei Nikolaevich Romanov, which ignited an unknown fascination with the brutal and enigmatic end to the Russian Tsarist era and the socialist nation that followed it. Finally, Russian was exotic and challenging, and promised a fascinating cultural history. Learning Russian has been a challenge, although I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

My experience as a second language learner has been diverse and fascinating, and it has allowed me to gain perspective and establish my own beliefs about what makes somebody a successful language learner. First and foremost, I believe that in order to be a successful second language learner, it is imperative to have a genuine desire to learn the language, and to set goals.

In my experience, immersion has proved to be the best way to acquire another language. As a junior in high school, I spent two weeks working as a teacher's assistant in Alsace, France. This experience proved to be more than just an interesting cultural experience; it also allowed me to learn vocabulary pertinent to the environment in which I was working; that is to say, I learned to explain activities that I would have been unable to properly describe in the past. For example, "Aujourd'hui les enfants ont collé des boules de coton sur les oreilles des lapins papiers pour Pâques" (Today, the children glued cotton balls onto paper bunnies for Easter) was a sentence that proved to be more relevant than I could ever have imagined prior to that trip. However, that sentence



serves as an example, signifying the importance of immersion when learning a second language.

Although I have years of experience with second language acquisition, I am by no means a perfect language learner, and quite frequently struggle with various aspects of the languages that I study. However, no matter how difficult the challenges these languages pose, for me, there is no greater reward than the feeling I get each time I am able to hold a conversation in a language other than my native English. Because of this, foreign language learning has become one of my biggest passions.

*ENG-NISH-IAN**English, Spanish, and Russian*

Joselyn Saez

For as long as I can remember I have been consumed in the practices of bilingualism. Having my grandmother, who only spoke Spanish, babysit me from birth until the age of six allowed me to grasp the basics of the beautiful language that connects me to my culture. Following my grandmother as she would complete her daily errands, speaking to me in Spanish, and having me respond to her in my own construction of Spanglish was a linguistic bond that caused me to become so attached to the remarkable woman who spoke the tongues of my motherland. Unfortunately, my Spanish was erased into a fading existence of only a handful of words as I began public school. Only being able to communicate very few ideas, primarily in the kitchen setting, caused for that bond that I had with my grandmother to be lost in translation. Family dinner parties, *novelas*, and music were the only outlet of Spanish that I had, for at home and school I was spoken to in English. At the time of this major linguistic transition, I was unaware the privilege that was slipping away from me.

Historically, when Puerto Rican immigrants traveled into the United States, like many, they were forced to learn English in hopes of creating a life for themselves. Because of this, much of the Spanish that was spoken from Puerto Ricans living in the United States was only amongst their families' daily dinner conversations. Little by little, unless formally taught in school, much of the Spanish spoken by Puerto Ricans was limited to conversations that were held at home, but not much outside of that sphere. In essence, the Spanish that was spoken by many was considered slang or 'Spanglish' due to the

lack of use in the language when in America. Growing up in a family that varied in the linguistic proficiency of Spanish because of the historical aspects of my culture, allowed me to use the basics of the language that I held onto from my childhood, bringing my family closer with every family dinner party, but being fluent was near impossible for me.

During my junior year in high school I walked into my first language course: Russian. It was mandatory in my school for all juniors and seniors to take Russian, and although many of my friends hated the idea, I could not hide my excitement. It was not long before Russian became the best hour and twenty minutes of my day. Going home with Russian homework, I would explain to my family just how interesting I thought this class was and through my excitement and wide eyed stare I conveyed my enjoyment in speaking this language. I would share the lessons that I would learn in class to my family at dinner and explain to them just how much I loved that class. Of course my family was happy that I enjoyed this class, but always insisted that I should be learning Spanish and not Russian. Nonetheless, There was something so liberating in being able to lose myself in the language and culture that was so unlike my own. The differences in tradition, cultural norms, the sounds, and even the alphabet all captured my full attention, for in my mind, within that hour and twenty minutes, I was Russian. There were no implications that I should be born with the ability to speak this language, nor was there a pressure to be fluent. This feeling was pure enjoyment.

What was mandatory in high school became my first class choice in college. I fell in love with the culture and language of Russia and soon immersed myself in classes that reflected my interests. Using my time at Connecticut College as a time of self-discovery is what has inspired me to make Slavic Studies my major. Although I did not know what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, or what career I can see myself doing for

the rest of my life, I knew that I enjoyed Russian. Moreover, I was taught by my mother that life is too short to waste my time taking part in things I do not find enjoyment in, or that will not lead me to enjoyment; when you find something that you find pure joy in even the worst of the situations, hold onto it because that is what a career should be. Thus, when I find myself up late trying to translate a text from Russian to English and I am sleep deprived, hungry, and still have this happiness when it is completed, I know that whatever I choose to do for the rest of my life, I want Russian to be a part of it.

Being in Russian classes where I am constantly pushed beyond my linguistic boundaries, I find myself learning more about the English language than I did growing up. This reality influenced me to take up a class on Linguistics. In this linguistics course I was able to learn about the different sets of signs and sounds that make up what we know as language. With the information that I was learning in my linguistics course, I connected to my language in cultural setting course. There I was introduced to the cultural aspects of linguistics that assigned each language, each culture, and each individual set of signs their own meaning. I was beyond impressed and intrigued with the amount of depth that these courses added to my Russian language class as well as my Spanish and English speaking abilities. Connecting it all together made me not only appreciate Russian, but all languages.

Language, whether it is written, spoken, or read, is a powerful and beautiful thing. As humans we are social beings that need are indeed created to socialize and Language is the system in which we are able to fulfill our intended purpose. Thus, I believe language, no matter the fluency, nativity, or learned is an important and essential aspect to every human being and has definitely guided me through my life. Language is more than what we speak, it is who we are.

## **Appendix**

### *MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS' STYLE* *The Taínos of the Second Voyage of Columbus*

*From the diary of Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca, 1493,  
as revised by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1527:*

On Thursday, the 14th of November, the Admiral stopped at another island which he called Sancta Cruz [St. Croix, today]; and he sent men ashore to capture some natives, and thus learn their language. They seized four women and two children, and, as they were returning in the rowboat, they encountered a canoe, which contained four Indians and an Indian woman; when the Indians realized that they could not flee, they, including the woman, began to defend themselves; they began to fire arrows, and they wounded two Christians, and the woman even pierced a shield with her arrow; the sailors crashed their boat into the canoe and overturned it; one of the Indians, who had not lost his bow, swam and fired his arrow, with almost the same vigor as if he had been ashore. They saw that one of the Indians had his generative instrument cut off; the Christians believed it was so that he could grow fatter, like a capon, then the Caribs would eat him... [F]rom there, he reached another large island, which he called Sant Juan Baptista, which we now call Sant Juan, and which, as we mentioned before, was called Boriquén by the Indians, in a bay of the island toward the west, where all the ships caught many kinds of fish.

Several Christians went ashore and walked to some houses that were very artfully made, although all were of straw and wood; and there was a plaza, with a road reaching from it to the sea, very clean and straight, made like a street; and the walls were of crossed or woven cane; and above, beautiful gardens, as if they were vineyards or orchards of orange or citron trees, such as there are in Valencia or in Barcelona; and next to the sea there was a high watchtower, where ten or twelve people could fit, also well made; it was probably the pleasure house of the lord of that island, or of that part of the island. The Admiral does not mention having seen any people there; they must have fled in fright when they saw the ships.

*Source: Wagenheim, Kal & Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim, eds.  
The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History. Princeton, NJ:  
Markus Wiener, 2006, pp.3-4.*

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